
The Ultimate Love

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21 April 2024

Acts 4:5-12 • 1 John 3:16-24 • John 10:11-18



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

During his ministry on earth, Jesus spoke many times to his disciples, and many times to the crowds. His was a teaching ministry in large part, and he taught in two ways: first through words, secondly through example. You might say that Jesus' entire ministry was one great example of how to live in God's world. Jesus was humble, lived a simple life, and put other people's needs above his own. This last is really the greatest lesson he gave us. Though all the things he said, all the parables, all the examples and stories, one thing shines through: the love of Jesus for humankind. That love is obvious in all he did and said. And he showed that love through emptying and denying himself and taking on the cares and troubles of everyone else.

Look at the very first sentence of our Gospel reading today: "I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep." They are just sheep, or rather I

should say, we are just sheep — and Jesus is God, the creator of all we know and see. Yet he lowers himself in order to raise us up. He is willing to die — in fact, he did die, horribly, on a cross — to save us. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,” (John 15:13) and Jesus shows us this great love.

Jesus tells us we are to love everyone as he has loved us. From John: “My commandment is this: love one another, just as I have loved you” (John 15:12). The command, for it is not just a suggestion, is clear. But how are we to do this? Can we truly love one another? I can say I love my wife, and my family, and some close friends; and I can say that I share Christian love with my brothers and sisters in Christ, those I know through the Church. What about all the other people in the world? Or, let alone the world, all the other people in Halswell and Prebbleton? Do I love everyone who shops at New World? Do I love all the children who go to the Prebbleton School? Where do I begin, and where do I end?

For Jesus was not just speaking about those who believe in him, who have faith in him, who recognise him as their Saviour. Jesus loves all of his creation, whether Christians, Muslims, Hindus, even Satanists. Jesus’ love is universal. But let’s come back down to our little corner of the world. Can I love all the people I meet from day to day here in this parish? And if I can and do, how do I show that love? Will I lay down my life for them? Do I have to die for them, if called on to do so? Because Jesus was not speaking lightly, and as Christians we need to figure out a way to do what he asks, nay commands, us to do.

So let’s focus a little on the showing part of the love. How do we show our love for other people? And this is where we can begin to be practical. I believe it goes back to what we were discussing at first: the selfless love of Jesus. It is this selflessness which Jesus wants us to copy. Jesus wants us to humble ourselves and put others first. The extreme case of that selflessness is dying for the other person, and there was an example of that in the news the other day, about the policeman who saved the woman from drowning in her sinking car at French Bay, and was awarded a medal of honour by the Royal Humane Society. We might all do the same, if the opportunity presented itself. But such situations don’t come along too often — thank God.

No — but what we can do, in our daily lives, in our many interactions with people in our communities, is to humble ourselves and put the other person’s needs first. Defer to the other person. Try to see the world through his eyes. Put yourself in her place. It’s not fashionable to say so these days, but happiness does not depend on a strong self-image. It does not depend on self-actualisation. The “me-generation” was misguided. What we need is a “you-generation”, with each of us thinking of the other person. It’s something we

have to learn, for we are all born selfish. Babies think only of their own needs: when they're hungry, when they're cold, when they're tired. Slowly we learn that we are not alone in the world. And the great example for us all is Jesus Christ, who came into the world for the express purpose of denying himself and giving himself up for others.

The greatest love we can show for others is to introduce them to Jesus Christ. That is always challenging, I know; but opportunities do come to us, and we must be on the watch for them. We cannot force; we can only invite. And we can always show by example what it is to live in faith and obedience to God.

So we can honour Christ's sacrifice in small ways, every day of our lives. It needn't be painful. It needn't involve a supreme sacrifice. All we need is an open heart and a willingness to forget ourselves and do some good for another person. And ultimately that is what love is made of — those many things we do for each other. Those who show love, do love. And in the end we have Jesus' promise: "The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again" (John 10:17). The path Jesus leads us on, through a true, giving sort of love, leads to eternal life and the ultimate love: our Father in heaven. Amen.